

Letter from Gilbert Grosvenor to Alexander Graham Bell, September 14, 1914

National Geographic Society WASHINGTON, D. C. File GILBERT H. GROSVENOR, Director and Editor September 14, 1914 Dr. Alexander Graham Bell, Baddeck, Nova Scotia Dear Mr. Bell:

I am delighted to learn from Elsie that Melville is going to stay with you in Baddeck. It is a great opportunity for him to have this work with you, and I am sure that he will work hard and make the most of it, and I hope you also will get pleasure from the arrangement.

I am writing to ask your assistance along the following line in your work with Melville. As you know, Melville has been to school very little, and most everything that he does know he has learned at home. He has worked at home for two reasons. (1) I long since found that when he was with other boys he spent most of his time watching them and letting his own work slide (a phase of his nervousness) . (2) Most of the emphasis at schools for boys of his age and younger is put on arithmetic and grammar. I have felt that the many weeks spent at school on such things as cube root, square root, least common divisor and highest common multiple was really wasted for boys of ten, eleven, twelve and thirteen, — that their mind is not mature enough for them, and that if a boy waits until fifteen or sixteen, he will absorb the necessary elements in mathematics, etc., quickly. English or grammar as taught in the schools puts all the emphasis on rules, and consists in so many rules that boys hate to write. Also the reading done at schools is so fragmentary and supercritical that I know very few boys of twelve who are fond of reading.

The result of Melville's home work has been that he is way behindhand in arithmetic, and he knows nothing about grammar, but he reads almost anything he can get his hands on,

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and he can write a very good letter or story, fairly accurate grammatically, and the spelling good for a boy of twelve, though he has never studied spelling.

I am sending you a letter which he wrote me last week, and which I wish you would read carefully. You will note that he writes easily, and, I think, forcibly.

For the past two years part of his regular work at home has been to write four or five times a week a story of about 200 to 400 words. He described something that he had done or something that he had read, or had thought of. At first he found this writing quite an effort, but I got him a typewriter, on which he hammers willingly. I doubt if he is yet ready to invent stories.

I am anxious that he should continue his writing, and I am writing to ask you particularly to encourage him to write frequently. His notebook is excellent practice, but he ought to do more writing than this. I find that his thoughts run on more easily when he uses the typewriter, and of course he can't use the typewriter for his notebook. He and I have always gone over the stories that he has written. I rarely point out a misspelled word or a grammatical fault, as he usually discovers them himself. I also never laugh or poke fun at any of his expressions, as I want him to be perfectly natural. If a boy can get in the habit of writing as easily and quickly as his thoughts pass through his head, writing gradually becomes second nature.

I don't know much about Melville's mechanical ability. He has had no opportunity with me to develop along this line, but he is very eager for information on any subject, whether it is torpedoes or subjects in the newspapers.

Personally, I think that if he has any natural gift, it is more in writing than in mechanical work, nor is this to be wondered at, because the majority of his ancestors are literary. On his mother's side, you, his grandfather Melville Bell, his great grandfather Alexander Bell and also his grandmother, Mrs. Graham Bell, all have unusual gifts in writing. On my side, there is his grandfather Grosvenor, & also his great grandmother Grosvenor, my father's

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mother, who was the author of twenty books written for Sunday Schools between 1840 and 1855. This ancestor of mine was one of the most gifted authoresses of her time. Also his grandfather Waters, my mother's father, was a writer of considerable ability, being a contributor to Harper's Magazine when this magazine was at the top.

No matter what profession Melville may adopt later, nor what work he does, if he can describe his work clearly and cleverly, he will have a tremendous advantage over his competitors.

I am very anxious that Melville should continue the study of English, of synonyms, and the meaning and niceties of expression. On the subject of speech and elocution, the Bell family have never been equalled. Your telephone patent won out because of the exactness with which you described a very difficult process. If you had not had the training in writing that you had had as a boy, it is probable that you would not have been able to express the meaning so accurately. I believe you have told me that the decision about your patent rested entirely on one word, which you coined.

Melville's laboratory work is splendid, but I do hope that you can give him training in elocution and in writing. Don't expect too much from him, as he is only twelve. But now is a wonderful opportunity for him to get from you some of that education in English which you alone possess. I have expressed this thought several times in my letters to Elsie during the past two weeks, and was delighted to hear from her last night that you were teaching Melville the Melville Bell symbols. I hope once in a while you can read to him some passages from Shakespeare, etc. He will unconsciously absorb a great deal that way.

I am asking a great deal of you, but it is a good cause.

Love to Little Mother Bert